

An exclusive edition of The Local for the SI Network for Future Global Leaders

Why I'm in Sweden: social entrepreneurship and the slums of Brazil

Published: 05.Nov.2015 08:28 hrs



Why are you in Sweden? What do you hope to change in the world? Tomás da Costa S. Vasconcelos, a second-year scholarship student from Brazil, shares his story and his vision.

Social entrepreneurship is huge. Even in a country like Sweden, where welfare works incredibly well, you often hear about social entrepreneurs and impact investment funds.

So what is it about social entrepreneurship that is so special?

Well, I can only speak for myself. I grew up in Brasília, the capital of Brazil. With all the crime and poverty we have there, we're exposed to the fact that the world is very unfair on a daily basis, and I think that makes people feel more responsible for it. So when I finished my Bachelor's degree I started a non-profit organization with my friends.

There were already a lot of interesting organizations doing projects with children, refugees, the environment or animals but no one really knew about them because they didn't know how to use social media or marketing well.

So we decided to create a social network to help find organizations where you could contribute according to your skills and where you live. I was working with it for almost two years.



After a few months we merged with a bigger organization in São Paulo. They had some support from a student who worked for Facebook and today we are partnering with the UN, and our organization Atados (www.atados.com.br) has turned into Brazil's most successful volunteer organization.

We were exposed to so much. We had to find all of these organizations, so we had to go to all the poor forgotten areas and the slums that were around the city. To go see everyone that was invisible.

Once I volunteered at a shelter for children with abuse problems at home, who had to be taken from their parents. I was responsible for a boy who was just three years old and his name was Pedro.

The first time I went to see him he begged me for money. Just the fact that he already knew how to beg at age 3, when he barely knew how to talk, was so tough.

One time we took the kids to a really beautiful lake to have fun outside and play in the sun. When we got there, Pedro suddenly started running like crazy towards the lake. And I was really scared that he would fall in so I ran after him and caught him midway, but he was holding onto this rail, and he really didn't want to let me get him.

And I said, "Pedro, come on, I'm not going to hurt you, just come with me."

And then out of nowhere he started telling me, "I want to die, I want to die."

And I was terrified and told him, “Don’t say things like that Pedro,” and he went on to say, “No one loves me, no one cares about me,” and this boy is three years old.

So I pulled him closer and put him in my lap and started telling him that everything’s going to be ok, don’t worry, and he was crying and I was crying and I realized he had never experienced anyone holding him like that.

So he stayed in my arms for twenty or thirty minutes before he finally would let go and started to go back to the other kids to play. And every now and then he would just stop what he was doing for a second and look at me, and he realized that I saw him, that I noticed him, and he was so happy to see that someone saw he existed.



It all just got too much; after a while I realized I couldn’t go on like that, so I came up with a new plan. I would go to a business school, one of the best if I could, to learn how the business world works. To understand how banks think, how people with power make decisions and why they make them and to see how the world is really run.

Because in the end, we were filled with good intentions but if you want to change things you need power and money. Sure, you can go to the slums in the weekends and give them love, but that’s not the long-term solution. People need infrastructure and jobs.

So that’s why I’m here in Sweden. I was fortunate to be awarded a Swedish Institute Scholarship to continue my plan.

Still, one important thing is to always keep a foot towards your goal. Now I am director for the Hult Prize, which is a social entrepreneurship competition.

We want to help students here think about business ideas that will change the world. Because non-profits are super cool, but what we need to do is to think big, to think impact. Hult Prize got, you know, Bill Clinton, and that's the kind of people we need.



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